

# **Associated Press**

## **Hawaii delegation introduces revised Akaka bill with renewed hope of boosting Native Hawaiians**

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WASHINGTON (AP) - Hawaii lawmakers renewed their push in Congress on Wednesday to restore some of the self-governance powers Native Hawaiians lost when the islands' queen was overthrown more than a century ago.

A new version of the bill no longer specifically bans a Hawaiian government entity from running a gambling operation or from setting up a reservation similar to those established for Native Americans, and it provides no special exemption for the Pentagon.

With Hawaii-born Barack Obama in the White House, supporters are hopeful that this time they will finally succeed. Obama promised during the presidential campaign that he would sign the bill if elected.

"This benefits all the people of Hawaii," chief sponsor Sen. Daniel Akaka, D-Hawaii, said in prepared remarks upon reintroducing his Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization Act.

"My bill would ensure there is a structured process by which Native Hawaiians and the people of Hawaii can come together," he said.

Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, co-sponsored the bill in the Senate, while companion legislation was introduced in the House by Rep. Neil Abercrombie, D-Hawaii, and co-sponsored by Rep. Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii.

The bill would set up a process for Native Hawaiians to participate in the creation of a permanent governing entity similar to Native American tribal governments.

This would allow Native Hawaiians to negotiate directly with local, state and federal governments over such issues as control of natural resources, lands and assets.

Akaka has been pushing the legislation for years without seeing it enacted into law. Previous versions have passed the House, including in 2007, and the bill also passed a Senate committee in 2007. But Senate leaders shelved it in face of opposition from the Bush administration, which contended the measure would divide Americans "along suspect lines of race and ethnicity."

Obama, by contrast, declared while campaigning for president that the legislation would fulfill the promise of "liberty, justice and freedom" for Native Hawaiians.

There are some 400,000 people nationwide of Native Hawaiian ancestry.

The legislation's latest incarnation is the same as the one Hawaii lawmakers pushed in 2000, and somewhat different from the 2007 version, which included some language that was meant to satisfy the Bush administration.

The 2007 version explicitly banned a future Native Hawaiian government from taking private land or setting up casinos. The version introduced Wednesday doesn't explicitly ban gambling, but Akaka aides said that since gambling already is illegal in Hawaii, such a provision is unnecessary.

Similarly, Native Hawaiians aren't barred in the new bill from forming reservations, but the bill requires a negotiation process with the state and federal governments -- and implementing legislation -- before any agreements could be reached, including on land issues.

The 2007 version also exempted the Defense Department from the legislation's reach while the current version treats the Pentagon like any other federal agency.

The rights of Native Hawaiians have been an issue since the 1893 coup that drove Queen Liliuokalani from the throne.

In 1959, when Hawaii became a state, the federal government pledged to use lands and assets to the benefit of Native Hawaiians. In 1993, on the 100th anniversary of the coup, Congress approved a resolution apologizing for the illegal overthrow and acknowledging that Native Hawaiians never directly relinquished their claims to sovereignty over their lands.

Native Hawaiians have ceded close to 2 million acres of land since the overthrow, according to advocates.

Native Hawaiians would not gain new eligibility under the bill for programs and services now available to American Indians.